

GENERAL SYNOD 2012
THE ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH'S PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS,
CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL, DUBLIN, THURSDAY 10 MAY

**The Most Revd Alan Harper, OBE, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate
of All Ireland**

Members of the General Synod, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I welcome you to this first ordinary session of the 48th General Synod of the Church of Ireland. I particularly welcome those of you who are new to the General Synod and those representing sister churches in these islands. This year, for the first time ever, by virtue of legislation passed last year, representatives of other churches have a right of audience in our discussion of reports and motions. I look forward to the enrichment and encouragement brought to us by your presence and active participation.

Much of what I want to say in my address this morning focuses upon the importance of the role and ministry of the laity in the life of the Church. It would be difficult to esteem too highly the devoted service that lay people give to the Church of Ireland at representative level in parochial, diocesan and central church life. That commitment and service is well represented by the example of two very different but equally esteemed lay members of the Church of Ireland, who, in the recent weeks, have passed to their eternal reward. I refer to Dr Joan Turner from the Diocese of Connor and Canon JLB Deane from Cork, Cloyne and Ross.

Joan Turner was a member of the General Synod for 24 years. A distinguished medical doctor she had a scientist's thirst for knowledge and understanding that she pursued with a lively intellect. Few people realised that for the whole of her life Joan had to struggle with dyslexia. Perhaps, partly at least, it was this struggle that endued her with the genuine empathy she had for people in difficulty and distress.

Dr Turner contributed unstintingly to the work of the Board for Social Responsibility in Northern Ireland. She understood from personal experience the difficult issues associated with adoption. With her husband, Canon Edgar Turner, Joan was also deeply involved in supporting and fighting for justice for mixed marriage couples and their families. She also contributed much to consultations in the Church of Ireland that ultimately led to legislation permitting the re-marriage of divorced persons in church.

During the most difficult days of the 'Troubles', Joan and Edgar Turner endured the dislocation and distress of being bombed out of their rectory home in Myrtlefield Park, Belfast: something that, thankfully, few clergy families had to endure in those unlamented days. They also saw the Parish Church of St George, Belfast, damaged time and again by IRA bombs. Many might have been discouraged to the point of despair, but not the Turners, and, as the Prince of Wales saw for himself two weeks ago, St George's continues to flourish. Such tenacity and patient continuance in well doing requires

extraordinary faith and self-sacrifice. Both characterized the life and person of Dr Joan Turner.

Generous to a fault in the time and energy he gave to the affairs of our Church, Canon JLB Deane gave practically all of his adult life to serve the Church of Ireland at every possible level. He served his parish, his diocese, the Representative Church Body, the General Synod and the Standing Committee, as well as many other committees, all with the greatest distinction. He was a member of the General Synod for 50 years and for 23 years, between 1970 and 1994, he was a Lay Honorary Secretary. JLB Deane was among the first to have his contribution to the life of the Church of Ireland recognised by appointment to a Lay Canonry of St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh in 1997.

John Leonard Barry Deane was the scourge of any whose utterances in his hearing, in synod or elsewhere, were inaccurate, inopportune, inept, inconsequential or inappropriate. He didn't suffer fools at all, let alone gladly! But his contribution to the life and work of the synod and of the Church of Ireland was immense and the clergy, in particular, owe him a great debt of gratitude for his crucial contribution to the establishment of the Clergy Pension Fund. When we come to the consideration of the Report of the Representative Church Body, especially the future of pensions for the clergy, I cannot escape the suspicion that the bespectacled, eagle eye of Canon John Barry Deane will be cast critically upon our deliberations.

The elected and co-opted members of the Representative Church Body, ably supported by the staff, bring experience and expertise in abundance to the stewardship of the resources of this church. The record of their labours is set out in the Book of Reports. I cannot pretend that it makes cheerful reading. The more difficult the economic and social conditions the greater the challenges confronted by the RB, and, as you will have seen from the Book of Reports, these are extremely difficult times. The issue of the solvency of the Clergy Pension Scheme constitutes one of the major matters before us for consideration in this General Synod. Members of synod will readily appreciate the immense amount of work already undertaken by the Pensions Board, the RB Executive and, in particular, the Solvency Working Group. I warmly commend the work of the Solvency Group and look forward to the presentation that may be made on the group's behalf.

The responsibility for the day-to-day management and administration of the Representative Body falls to the Secretary and Chief Officer, Mr Denis Reardon. In August of this year Denis Reardon will retire from office after 10 years as Chief Officer. Before that he served as Head of Finance. At a time that has seen sharp reductions in the values of our capital assets, with associated reductions in the income derived from those assets, Denis has been called upon to undertake cost saving measures in the budget of Church of Ireland House. As a result staffing levels have been pared to the bone. This is neither a pleasant nor an easy thing to be asked to implement. On behalf of all his friends and colleagues in the Church of Ireland, I wish to thank Mr Reardon for his unstinting service and passionate tenacity in good times and in bad. On your behalf, members of the

General Synod, I wish Denis and Mrs Reardon many happy and healthy years of retirement.

The substantial reduction in staffing levels in Church House adds significantly to the workload of those who are left. Therefore, I wish to express my gratitude to every staff member for the way in which they have accepted and managed the increased burden of expectations laid upon them.

Denis Reardon is to be succeeded as Chief Officer by Adrian Clements, who is currently Head of Finance. I congratulate Adrian and welcome his appointment. We all look forward to the contribution he will make to the management of the affairs and the development of the role of the Representative Body in the years that lie ahead.

The other matter, along with clergy pensions, that may occupy us at this year's synod is that of Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief. I want to say something about the way in which we should address this sensitive subject and the interplay of different factors that impact upon the way we should respond as a church.

Arising out of the atmosphere created and the desire expressed at the Conference on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief that we should continue the journey of respectful and charitable listening in pursuit of deeper and clearer understanding of the will and purpose of God in these matters, the archbishops and bishops of the Church of Ireland, with the encouragement of the Standing Committee, will seek to present three motions offering a possible way forward.

The motions that the Archbishop of Dublin and the Bishop of Down and Dromore will seek to introduce belong together. The first sets out the doctrinal understanding of marriage and the appropriate context for sexual intercourse, as currently set forth in the formularies of the Church of Ireland. To set out the current position is not to pre-determine any future adjudication the General Synod may reach on such matters. Indeed, Canon 31, which is quoted in the first motion, actually takes the form that it does as a direct result of decisions taken by the General Synod permitting the re-marriage in church of divorced persons is itself witnesses to the fact that Canons may be added, altered, refined, replaced or abolished by the General Synod at its absolute discretion.

The second motion acknowledges openly the hurt and injury experienced at times by Lesbian and Gay people as a result of the words and actions of Church members. It articulates the commitment of the Church of Ireland to being sensitive to the pastoral needs of Gay and Lesbian people and a safe and welcoming place for everyone.

The third motion, if approved, directs the Standing Committee to bring to next year's synod recommendations for the formation of a Select Committee to study the issue of Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief and to report progress to the General Synod on the basis of a specific timetable.

The additional work generated by the need to provide for the special conference for synod members that took place at the Slieve Russell Hotel in March, followed by the framing of motions to be brought to the synod, have made heavy demands on the time and energy of my fellow bishops. Therefore, I want to pay a particular and personal tribute to my colleagues in the House of Bishops, not only for their commitment to providing means by which the Church of Ireland may address what are experienced in all the churches as difficult and potentially divisive issues, but also for their commitment to modelling and sustaining a spirit of unity in the Church of Ireland.

Members of the General Synod, this is but ‘work in progress’, and it is work not for bishops alone but for the General Synod on behalf of the Church of Ireland as a whole. Leadership in the Church of Ireland, especially in the context of the role of bishops, consists not in telling the Church what to think but in assisting the Church in coming to a richer, deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the faith we have received. The archbishops and bishops of the Church of Ireland guard and define the doctrine of the Church only to the extent that they may be called upon to declare whether or not a particular view is consonant with the current teaching of the Church as the Church of Ireland has received it. Ultimate sovereignty under God rests with the General Synod. Therefore, I want to say something about the character of the Church of Ireland, particularly in the context of the work of the General Synod and especially the role of the laity.

The Irish Church Act of 1869 freed the Church of Ireland to elect representatives and to hold assemblies, synods or conventions. The Act provided for the bishops, clergy and laity to meet for the purpose of framing constitutions and regulations for the general management and good government of the church, its affairs and its property, and for future representation in diocesan synods or general convention or in other ways.

The Act declared that the ecclesiastical law, the articles, rites, discipline and ordinances existing in 1869 were to be binding on the members of the Church subject to such modifications or alterations as might, in conformity with the provisions of the Constitution, subsequently be made. The Act also declared that the ecclesiastical law, articles, rites, discipline and ordinances such as then existed or might subsequently exist should be binding on the members of the Church in exactly the same way as if they had mutually contracted and agreed to observe and abide by them.

The Act also provided, you may be glad to hear that, ‘nothing herein contained shall be construed to confer on any archbishop, bishop, or other ecclesiastical person any coercive jurisdiction whatsoever.’

Thus the Irish Church Act lays upon the bishops, clergy and laity of the Church of Ireland an onerous duty. Every synods-person here, jointly and severally, is, in effect, charged with a measure of responsibility for the guardianship of the faith, order and discipline of this Church. We are also given authority, if we deem it consonant with the will of God, to modify or alter the “articles, doctrines, rites, rules, discipline and ordinances” of the Church of Ireland. In small ways and in greater we have exercised that authority in the

past. It will be for the General Synod to decide whether and in respect of what issues it may be right, in the future, to do so again. What is not appropriate is precipitate action that eschews deep prayer, careful study and respectful consultation. In this regard, the Slieve Russell Conference was, I believe, a significant step for us because it enabled deeper reflection and more profound dialogue than we are accustomed to enjoying at ordinary sessions of the General Synod.

It may be that we have identified a fresh and reflective way of enabling the work of the General Synod to proceed at greater depth, freed from the formal constraints and rigidities of standing orders. In seeking to enhance the work of the General Synod and encourage greater participation by Synod members, we could do worse than examine the benefits that regular synod conferences might bring, especially in the consideration of complex or contentious matters. Such conferences might be scheduled once in each triennium and still leave ample time for legislation in succeeding years. But I digress.

We need not pretend that the Church of Ireland, or for that matter the worldwide Anglican Communion, is unique in confronting issues to do with Human Sexuality. Such discussions and the existence of conflicting views are evident in other denominations too. We are merely one Church struggling to find our way.

The extent to which the churches are challenged by the circumstances of the modern world and the speed at which established cultural assumptions are changing in Ireland and elsewhere, is demonstrated by a recent survey published in *The Tablet* and conducted amongst the membership of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. The survey demonstrated the extent and the continuing pace of change in outlook, attitudes, beliefs and self-confidence now exhibited among the people surveyed. 87% of now believe that priests should be allowed to marry; 77% believe that women should be ordained to the priesthood; around 75% do not believe that Catholic teaching on sexuality is relevant to themselves or their families; while 60% reject the teaching that the sexual expression of love between gay couples is immoral [*The Tablet* 14.04.2012]. The Church of Ireland is not insulated from similar processes of attitudinal change.

One of the key characteristics of the Church of Ireland, indeed of the Anglican Communion, is that we recognize no overarching centralized teaching authority or *magisterium*. We hold in deep reverence the authority of scripture and our ancient formularies, but – as the responses from other churches of the Anglican Communion to the proposals for an Anglican Covenant demonstrate – centralized authority, with the capacity and responsibility to pronounce upon doctrine and life, is approached with a reserve that occasionally verges on hostility. The autonomy we exercise as individual provinces of a single family of churches –pioneered by the Church of Ireland as a result of the Irish Church Act - has not been and will not readily be surrendered even by those provinces, such as Ireland, that have actually agreed to subscribe the Covenant.

These characteristics of our history, polity and temper as a church have particular implications when considering aspects of doctrine, liturgy and life. I think it is important, therefore, to understand the extent to which the Church of Ireland recognizes and

embraces the status and role of the laity in the life of the Church. Our polity encourages us to pay particular attention to voice of the laity. That is why, in the House of Representatives, two thirds of the membership is allocated to the lay people of the church. It is also why we can never be wholly insulated from societal and attitudinal change.

This does not mean, however, that we fall into the trap of endorsing the ancient Latin tag, 'Vox populi, vox dei' – 'the voice of the people is the voice of God.' The Church is not a democracy in that sense. Alcuin, writing to Charlemagne more than 14 centuries ago (in AD798) declared: 'Those people should not be listened to who keep saying the voice of the people is the voice of God, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness.' [*Nec audiendi qui solent dicere, Vox populi, vox Dei, quum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit.*] Having said that, we do, nevertheless, esteem very highly the collective wisdom of faithful laity and clergy.

The nature of Christianity is that it is founded in divine revelation to which the Church bears witness. That revelation, set forth in the Holy Scriptures, is the core of the tradition of the Church - the faith once for all delivered to the saints [Jude v3]. The visible Church is the contemporary guardian of tradition, recognizing that there is a greater cloud of witnesses by which we are surrounded than merely those who currently constitute the visible Church. GK Chesterton put it rather well when he said, 'Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors.' Chesterton did not, however, imply that contemporary perspectives might never be entertained, indeed he said, "Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion." Thus, contemporary opinion deserves respect but requires to be weighed against established tradition as a test of its relative significance.

So then, our reverence for the voice of the laity is not about some form of democracy. The Church does not neglect, but neither does it unthinkingly glorify, the contemporary opinions of good men and women. Rather, we seek, in the Church and specifically in the meetings of the General Synod, to hear from faithful people and to find, if possible, even in matters controversial, common ground for agreement. Let me, therefore, say again: the role of those charged with the service of leadership in such circumstances is not to impose a determination in authoritarian fashion, but to guide and assist the church in finding a common mind through the operation of the Holy Spirit. In so doing we recall the formula employed by the Church of the Book of the Acts which declared at a momentous time of division and decision, 'it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.' [Acts 15.28]

In saying these things we readily acknowledge that the Church of Ireland is but a tiny part of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of God and therefore we, as a church, must remain attentive to the wisdom of the wider Church. But this does not mean that we must submit to a kind of mental and spiritual paralysis, for we have an equal obligation and responsibility under God to consider, discriminate and conscientiously adjudicate on behalf of this particular part of the Church which has been planted in our land.

You may be familiar with the concept of the *consensus fidelium* which Cardinal John Henry Newman translated as ‘the agreement of the faithful’. Newman spoke of the ways in which the consent of the faithful is to be seen. He writes of a sort of instinct or *fronema*, deep in the bosom of the mystical body of Christ. That instinct derives from the direction of the Holy Spirit and is an answer to the prayer of faithful people. It expresses itself in the form of a resentment of error, which it experiences as a scandal.

Newman concludes, ‘each constituent portion of the Church has its proper functions, and no portion can safely be neglected. Though the laity be but the reflection, or echo of the clergy in matters of faith, yet there is something in the *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio* (the unanimity of clergy and laity) which is not in the pastor alone.’

We need to remember that the faith of the individual Christian is always something she or he has received, in, through and from the church. St Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 4.7, ‘What do you have that you did not receive?’ However, the reception by each individual of what she or he has received is hermeneutically unique, that is to say unique to each individual concerned in its interpretation and appropriation. The distinguished theologian Karl Rahner wrote:

‘Today’s Christians face the problem of synthesizing their faith with all they know and experience as individuals. To this end they must differentiate between more and less binding Church teachings. The formed Christian must be aware of the “hierarchy of truths”, must know the effectively central and existential roots of the faith, so as to deepen this understanding and, while not denying, pay less attention to what is secondary. Formed Christians must find their own idea of God and of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ.’ [*The Adult Christian*]

In other words ‘formed Christians must distinguish between what is essential to the task of seeking personal understanding of God and eternal salvation through Christ and what is more peripheral. A more typically Anglican way of expressing the same idea is set out in those sections of the Windsor Report which discuss ‘*adiaphora*’ and ‘subsidiarity’, although there, of course, the discussion explores not individual but corporate and provincial responsibility for discernment.

In respect of ‘*adiaphora*’, the Windsor Report notes that:

‘Anglicans have always recognised a key distinction between core doctrines of the church (remembering that ethics, liturgy and pastoral practice, if authentically Christian, are all rooted in theology and doctrine) and those upon which disagreement can be tolerated without endangering unity. Paul urged Christians in Corinth and Rome to recognise some matters in this way (what to eat or not to eat being a prime example). When something is seen in this way, an individual church, at whatever level, can make its own decisions on the matter.’ [Sect 36]

In respect of subsidiarity, the Windsor Report notes that subsidiarity is:

‘...the principle that matters should be decided as close to the local level as possible.’ [Sect 38] The Report continues [Sect 94] ‘The two notions of *‘adiaphora’* and ‘subsidiarity’ work together like this: the clearer it is that something is ‘indifferent’ in terms of the Church’s central doctrine and ethics, the closer to the local level it can be decided; whereas the clearer it is that something is central, the wider must be the circle of consultation. Once again, this poses the question: how does one know, and who decides, where on this sliding scale a particular issue belongs?’

In other words, in the absence of a recognised and authoritative mechanism for determining which are things ‘indifferent’ and which central to the doctrine and ethics of the Church, how are the limits of provincial autonomy to be determined?

The Lambeth Conference of 1920, quoted in the Windsor Report, declared as follows:

‘The Churches in [the Communion] are indeed independent, but independent with Christian freedom which recognises the restraints of truth and love. They are not free to deny the truth. They are not free to ignore the fellowship.’

‘This means,’ the Windsor Report continued, ‘that any development needs to be explored for its resonance with the truth, and with the utmost charity on the part of all – charity that grants that a new thing can be offered humbly and with integrity, and charity that might refrain from an action which might harm a sister or brother.’

Any forthcoming discussions we may have will be conducted against the background of our membership of a worldwide communion – the Anglican Communion of Churches. The influential Toronto Anglican Congress of 1963, when considering the life of the Communion in the context of mission, characterized the relationships among sister churches of the Anglican Communion as ‘mutual responsibility and interdependence within the body of Christ’. Such a characterisation does not obviate the need for personal judgment on the part of individual Christians but it does remind us that we do not live to ourselves alone.

Laity and clergy taking council together on matters of intimate and profound importance for the church and the world is the essence of what gathers us in General Synod. Often the work is humdrum and uncontroversial, but sometimes it must deal with matters that give rise to real controversy. When this happens wisdom suggests that what is required first and foremost of every participant is humility.

Strongly held but divergent views are not best expressed aggressively. For every protagonist who holds an unshakeable conviction, there are likely to be others whose views are not fully or irrevocably formed. In seeking to persuade the undecided, volume is of much less utility than coherence! The Holy Spirit, whose work is to lead the people of God into all the truth, has not necessarily finished his work, either in the heart of the convinced protagonist or in that of the person still seeking understanding.

Whenever one seeks to articulate a viewpoint or defend a strongly held opinion it is wise to answer certain questions for oneself before critiquing or attempting to demolish the position of another: ‘What are the weaknesses in my position? What is problematic about the opinion I passionately and conscientiously hold?’

Wisdom also suggests that there is merit in asking a further question: ‘As far as I understand the position or opinion of those with whom I disagree (and I acknowledge that I may not understand them fully), what are the strengths of the arguments that they advance and which lead them to the conclusion they have reached?’ In other words, are there weaknesses in what I am saying and is there strength in the position of which I disapprove?

At the level of personal reflection and judgment, therefore, the grace of humility is particularly to be desired. Humility demands that each person acknowledge the need for modest reserve in pressing individual opinion or judgment. It is one thing to advocate a position. It is a completely different thing arrogantly to insist upon it. In the case of the advocacy of a course of action contrary to established tradition, a responsibility rests upon the advocate not to insist on change unless and until that change has received affirmation.

The careful articulation of individual opinion and judgment is vital to our work in synod but so is humble respect for the opinion of others. This is not to say that something novel is inevitably alien to the doctrine and life of the Church. Rather, one of the key tests is its ‘reception’ by the people of God. The test advocated by Gamaliel in the Acts of the Apostles illustrates the point. Gamaliel argued that if this new thing (in that instance the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ) is not of God it will wither and die. If this new thing is of God nothing can prevail against it and one might even find oneself fighting against God by denying or opposing it. [Acts 5, 38-9]

The mechanism of ‘reception’ involves approval of two types: approval on the basis of the strength of the argument, and approval based on experience. Approval by argument requires that a proposition should receive such support among the faithful as not to suffer peremptory rejection. Approval through experience requires that the lived outcome of provisional change receives affirmation within the Church on the grounds of its evident godliness.

Human judgment is fallible and frail. Therefore, I end with this: in situations which call for the exercise of discernment in circumstances of significant disagreement, the wisdom of no less trenchant a controversialist than John Calvin is much to be admired. Writing on matters to do with the discernment of the identity of those likely to be numbered among the elect and those who might be condemned as reprobate, Calvin advocated for every Christian ‘the exercise of charity’. The exercise of charity is appropriate to all situations of debate and in all circumstances of deeply held but disputed conviction within the body of Christ. I commend to this synod ‘the exercise of charity’.

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